

Pilgrimage Through the Watchtower

Chapter 1: "Taking In Knowledge"



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Chapter 1: "Taking In Knowledge"

I was sitting in our living room reading a book by Mahareshi Mahesh Yogi when Steve, my older brother by two years, came in.

"When you're meditating, what are you really doing?" he asked me.

"Well," I said, "according to Mahareshi, when a person meditates, he sets up a special effect in the spirit realm. This attracts the attention of spirit beings living there, and they come to him and help raise his level of consciousness."

"How do you know these aren't demons that you're contacting?" he asked.

"As far as I know, there aren't any such things as demons. When you get to the level of spirit beings, there's nothing evil there. Only good spirits inhabit the spirit realm."

"Well," Steve said, "the Bible says that demons are real. Jesus was continually casting demons out of people. What you believe doesn't agree with the Bible."

He was right, of course. I'd been reading the Bible for about a year by that time, and I could remember reading of many instances where Jesus had cast demons out of people.

"I've stopped meditating," Steve said, "and I think you should too."

Stop meditating! The idea was abhorrent! For the past two years I'd been deeply involved in Eastern teachings, and had been practicing Transcendental Meditation twice a day for the past year. I was making good progress! To stop meditating now would be ridiculous.

A little later in the day, Steve came to me again. "Come upstairs," he said. "I want to show you something."

I followed him upstairs and we sat on his bed. He opened his Bible and handed it to me. "Read this," he said, "chapter 24. Start at verse 3." I began reading Matthew chapter 24:

While he was sitting upon the Mount of Olives, the disciples approached him privately, saying: "Tell us, When will these

things be, and what will be the sign of your presence and of the conclusion of the system of things?"

And in answer Jesus said to them: "Look out that nobody misleads you; for many will come on the basis of my name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and will mislead many. You are going to hear of wars and reports of wars; see that you are not terrified. For these things must take place, but the end is not yet."

"For nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be food shortages and earthquakes in one place after another. All these things are a beginning of pangs of distress..." (Matthew 24:3-8, New World Translation)

"How about these signs that Jesus was talking about?" Steve asked. "Wars. Food shortages. Earthquakes. Doesn't this sound like what's happening in the world today? And look what this means. Verse 3 says that these are signs of the 'conclusion of the system of things.' We're living in the last days! The 'conclusion of the system of things' must be really close!"

Now this shook me up a little bit. From my Bible reading I had come to recognize Jesus as a wonderful teacher. Though I could understand very little of what He said, I'd found myself both attracted to and terrified by His teachings. He was a different sort of teacher than the others that I had been studying. Jesus' teachings had a power and authority that commanded my deepest respect. And here He was relating 20th-century history in advance, and saying that these things were the signs of the end of this world system!

Steve was learning these things from Jehovah's Witnesses. He had been studying with them for about six months, and was now recommending that I do the same. But before I go any further into that story, let me explain first how I got to this point.

I was raised with very little religious background. In my early years I believed that "anything can fill a hole" and that "religion is only for those who need it." I attended church just once while I was growing up, when I was about 12 years old.

In high school I began to wonder about some of the larger issues in life. This led to an intense interest in the supernatural, and I began reading books by such "enlightened" ones as John C. Lilly, Carlos Castaneda, G.I. Gurdjieff, P.D. Ouspensky, and Bagwan Shree Rajneesh. I began experimenting with various mind-control techniques, including Hindu meditations and self hypnosis.

By the time I entered my freshman year of college I was thoroughly devoted to my quest for "higher consciousness." I enrolled in a Yoga class at the college and began practicing Transcendental Meditation.

About this time I had also begun to read the Scriptures. My grandmother had sent me a New American Standard version of the Bible just after I had entered college. As I began to read it, I found the Bible to be a very intense and mysterious book. It was so hard to understand! Many of the teachings of Jesus seemed to agree with what I was learning in my quest for higher consciousness, yet there were other things that Jesus taught that stood in direct opposition to those teachings. Some of these things made me feel very uneasy, such as Jesus' teachings on eternal judgment and the "weeping and gnashing teeth," the "eternal fire prepared for the Devil and his angels," etc. I was also beginning to see that if the Bible really was the word of God, and Jesus really was who He claimed to be, namely, the Son of God, then truly "there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12)."

So by the time Jehovah's Witnesses arrived on the scene, I was ripe for them. I was reading and trying to understand the Bible on my own, but was having great difficulty. Where else could I turn for help?

There was a Christian in my dorm at college named Don. I met with him several times, hoping that he could help me out. But although he had apparently been a Christian for quite some time, his understanding of the Scriptures was not much better than mine. I remember asking him one day who Matthew was, as I had been reading the gospel of Matthew that week. He had no idea. What was I to do?

By this time my brother Steve had been studying with Jehovah's Witnesses for several months. I couldn't deny that he was learning some wonderful things from them about the Bible, and that I wasn't making the greatest of progress on my own. Maybe I should give the JW's a try after all?

I agreed to at least meet with the Witnesses. A week or so later, my brother Steve, my best friend Paul, and I met with Larry and Bob, two of the elders at the local Kingdom Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses in my home town of Hyde Park, New York. I was immediately struck with the Witness elders' command of the Scriptures. Never had I met anyone with such mastery of the Bible! They seemed to have all the answers! I couldn't ask a question but that they would flip through the pages of their Bibles and come up with a

Scriptural answer. I was impressed! And since I couldn't deny that the Bible was the word of God, and that Jehovah's Witnesses knew a lot more about the Bible than I did, my next step was clear. I would study the Bible with Jehovah's Witnesses.

A few weeks later I drove 260 miles north for my sophomore year at Clarkson University in Potsdam, N.Y. As soon as I arrived I wrote a letter to the local Kingdom Hall asking for someone to study the Bible with me. The following week I received a telephone call from Marshall, the presiding overseer of the Potsdam congregation. He said that he would be happy to study with me, and he mentioned that there was going to be a district convention of Jehovah's Witnesses in Lake Placid that weekend. He invited me to attend, if I could, and he said to look him up if I did come.

I decided to go. I made the 100-mile drive to Lake Placid full of anticipation. What kind of people was I going to find there? Would they all perhaps be the intensely spiritual, God-conscious people that I had been looking for in my search for Truth?

I arrived at the convention center and was met at the door by a gentleman in a three-piece suit who handed me a copy of the convention program. I walked inside, and was, to my dismay, thoroughly let down. The convention looked like a huge business meeting of some sort. Everyone was dressed in very businesslike fashion. About 2,000 people were sitting quietly in their seats listening to an older gentleman on the platform lecturing on various organizational instructions. I listened to the talk for a few minutes and gazed around at the people sitting in their seats. They looked like just regular, ordinary people. I walked out into the hallway and strolled around for awhile. If these were God's people, I thought to myself, I was going to have a hard time adjusting to this!

I was supposed to look for Marshall, but I had lost all desire to do so. I left after having been at the convention less than 10 minutes, and drove back to Potsdam. Though I was to study with Marshall for the next three years and become very close to him, I never had the heart to tell him that I had been at the convention.

Marshall and his wife, Meryl, were wonderful people. During my last three years of college they became my second family. Every week either Marshall would come to my dorm room or I would go to his house for a Bible Study. I often had dinner with them at their home, and we became very close. Marshall was the custodian at the high school in Potsdam, and lived in a small mobile home out in the country with Meryl and their two children. Potsdam winters were very cold, and the

warmth and love that I found in their home was wonderful. My Bible studies with Marshall and fellowship with his family were also great ways to escape the pressures of college life and the coldness of my technical studies. But best of all, I was learning from Marshall and Meryl many things about my Creator, Jehovah God.

During the summers, when I was at home in Hyde Park, I studied with Larry, one of the two elders that I had met with previously at the Kingdom Hall, and Dotti, his wife. I studied with them at their home for several hours each week. At one of these studies, Dotti, a full-time "pioneer," said something that really stuck in my heart. She told me that if she ever found out that Jehovah's Witnesses did not have the Truth, she would leave. She was a servant of God, not men.

Also during the summers, my brother Steve and I would often drive across the Hudson River to Watchtower Farms, a 45-minute drive, to hear special talks at the Kingdom Hall there. Zone overseers, missionaries from distant lands, and even members of the Governing Body (the 13 to 17-member body which governs all the affairs of Jehovah's Witnesses) would give these talks. What a privilege! My favorite talk was one given by Raymond Franz, who was at the time a member of the Governing Body. He spoke in depth about the first-century Corinthian congregation; its people, cultural background, the conditions prompting Paul's letters, etc. I recorded this talk on cassette tape and listened to it many times in my car on my way to and from my summer job at IBM in Poughkeepsie. One thing that he said in the talk really made a strong impression on me. He said that when encouraging his brothers, it is better for a Christian to give simple, heartfelt expressions of his faith than to make great displays of Bible knowledge. A few years later I was heartbroken to hear that Ray had been disfellowshipped (excommunicated) for "apostasy."

During these three and a half years that I studied with Jehovah's Witnesses, I spent an average of two hours per day reading the Bible and assorted Watchtower Society publications. While at college, I would often spend five or six hours at a time at the Potsdam State University library studying these books. By the time I was baptized in the spring of 1981, I had read over 30 of the Society's books, all of the Watchtower and Awake! magazines for those years, and had read the New World Translation of the Bible through several times.

In the spring of 1980 I graduated from Clarkson with a bachelor of science degree in mechanical engineering. By this time I had adopted the Society's view of higher education and decided not to attend my "worldly" graduation ceremony. In

fact, during my last couple of years of college, and for several years thereafter, I found myself almost apologizing to my Witness friends for having even gone to college. A college graduate amongst Jehovah's Witnesses is generally viewed with suspicion. His "worldly wisdom" makes it difficult for him to remain humble and submissive to the "mother" organization.

After graduation, I packed up and moved to Colorado Springs, Colorado. Digital Equipment Corporation had flown me out to Colorado Springs for an interview. Although Digital did not make me a job offer, I loved Colorado and decided to move out there anyway. There were many new computer and electronics companies moving into Colorado Springs, and I figured that I'd find an engineering job there without too much trouble.

But there were much stronger reasons for my moving to Colorado. Life at home was becoming unbearable. By this time I had stopped celebrating my birthday, Christmas and all the other "pagan" holidays. I had made known my stand on the blood transfusion issue (Jehovah's Witnesses will not accept blood transfusions, even in life-threatening situations). As a result, my mother was becoming extremely frustrated with me, and was often moved to tears when trying to reason with me. But since she had very little knowledge of the Bible, and was wholly without Scriptural support for her arguments, I was determined to serve God rather than men.

My father was no more kindly disposed toward the Witnesses than was my mom. I later found out that when Jehovah's Witnesses were planning to build the Kingdom Hall at the end of our residential street, my father had formed a committee to try to keep the Witnesses out of the neighborhood. Not only had his efforts to stop them from building the Kingdom Hall failed, but now two of his sons were walking down to the new Kingdom Hall three times a week to attend their meetings!

One day a couple of sisters out in "field service" came to our door. After giving them a thorough chewing out for tearing his family apart, my father went down into the basement, found a can of spray paint, and called Steve to the front door. "You tell those girls," he said, "that if they ever come back here again, I'm not going to say a word to them, but I'll just spray them with this paint," and he put the can next to the door. The paint was never used, as far as I know.

My best friend Paul wasn't helping things much, either. He had gotten hold of the book, "Thirty Years a Watchtower Slave," by William Schnell, and had given it to my mom. She read it, and in tears, pleaded with me to read it too. I read about half of the book and gave it back to Paul. It looked to

me as though Mr. Schnell simply had a grudge against the Society and this book was his way of venting his anger. It did little for me.

At this time I was convinced that the persecution that I was experiencing at home was a sure sign that I was coming into "God's organization." "A man's enemies will be the members of his household (Matt 10:36)." But then, in all of this, not once was I persecuted for the name of Jesus. This would come a few years later.

Before moving to Colorado Springs, I prayed to Jehovah that He would direct me to the proper congregation. There were thirteen congregations of Jehovah's Witnesses in Colorado Springs. I was confident that He would direct my steps.

I ended up at the Foothills congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses in Manitou Springs. To my disappointment, the first meeting that I attended, a Sunday morning public talk and Watchtower study, brought back all of the disappointing memories of that first district convention in Lake Placid. The meeting was awful! The public talk, given by one of the congregation's elders, was terribly boring, and the Watchtower study was even worse. A paragraph or two of the week's study article was read in a monotone by a brother on the platform, the Watchtower study conductor read the question at the bottom of the page, and the congregation offered robot-like answers from sentences that they had underlined in their magazines. What kind of meeting was this? From my association with many of the "Farm brothers" in New York, I had become accustomed to hearing answers given from the heart by brothers who really wanted to contribute something to the meeting. But this meeting was nothing like that. Could this congregation really be where Jehovah wanted me? I even contemplated writing a letter to the Society to let them know that this congregation needed help. But then, no, maybe Jehovah had arranged this whole thing after all. Maybe I was here to help stir things up? Maybe Jehovah had planted me here as a source of encouragement to my brothers. Let God's will be done, I acquiesced.

The first month of Foothills meetings that I attended I spent looking for someone who might enjoy studying with me, and I with him. There was in the Foothills congregation a young ex-Bethelite (one who had worked at Bethel, the world headquarters of Jehovah's Witnesses in Brooklyn, NY) named Dean, who seemed to be the most likely candidate. I approached Dean one evening after the weekly Service meeting and asked if he would like to study with me. He readily agreed, and we soon became the closest of friends.

I studied with Dean for a year. Then, on an off-road

motorcycle ride in the Colorado Rockies on a beautiful spring day in 1981, after three and a half years of diligent study, meditation, and intensive prayer, I dedicated my life to Jehovah God. That evening I informed Dean of my desire to be baptized. Shortly thereafter, on three separate occasions, I met with the Foothills elders, who reviewed with me the "80 questions for baptismal candidates" in the "Organized to Accomplish Our Ministry" book. Then, at the 1981 "Kingdom Loyalty" district convention of Jehovah's Witnesses in Denver, I was baptized. I was now, at last, a full-fledged, baptized Witness of Jehovah!

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